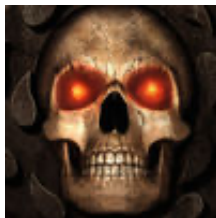


RPG Reload File 013 – 'Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition'

[November 6, 2014](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we teach cute little animals to go for the eyes. Each week, we'll be revisiting a classic RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up to the cruel light of the modern day. We'll also have some laughs and learn some valuable lessons about friendship and not leaving a can of Coke in your car overnight in Winnipeg in December. In my carefully planned schedule for this column, I've tried to strike a good balance of various types of RPGs from developers of differing sizes and fame, but once per month, I turn to you, dear readers, to choose the game you'd like to see me cover. Simply cast your vote in the comments below or in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in our forums. As this very installment you are reading is a reader's choice Reload, the next one will be **RPG Reload 017** in December. I'm probably going to change the rules on the reader's choice in the New Year to allow for some wackier picks, so this might be the last time the majority will rule. Take advantage of it!

I enjoyed doing a themed month in October, so I'm going ahead with a loose theme for November, too. Not every month will have one, mind you, but if I notice a common thread, I'll go ahead and tie them together to make myself look smarter. This month's theme is "Origins", and as you can tell from the name, we're going to be revisiting some influential firsts in the coming weeks. Your RPG selection nicely played into my hands, as an overwhelming majority of you voted for *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition* ([\\$9.99](#)). While it

certainly stood on the shoulders of giants itself, there's no denying that *Baldur's Gate* made a big impression on the RPG world, so it's as good a place as any to start our month of famous firsts. The iOS version of the game was released on iPad in October of 2012, with iPhone support coming just a couple of months ago in September 2014.



Baldur's Gate was an important game for many reasons. Prior to its release in 1998, traditional PC RPGs were in pretty bad shape market-wise. *Ultima* and *Wizardry* were in the process of gulping their last breaths as single-player PC franchises, MMOs like *Ultima Online* and action RPGs like *Diablo* were grabbing serious attention in the PC space, and Japanese console RPGs were finally starting to catch fire worldwide. Great single player RPGs were still releasing, like the previous year's *Fallout* just as one example, but things were going down fast. *Baldur's Gate* wouldn't end up saving the genre from its eventual downswing, but it did buy it a hefty reprieve. Perhaps more importantly, its success firmly established relatively new developer BioWare as a force to be reckoned with in the RPG genre. They would go on to develop and assist in the development of several other major PC RPGs before splitting their focus with the console scene, which was rapidly

developing a taste for WRPGs. Though the extent of its dilution is a matter of argument, most people could probably agree that some of *Baldur's Gate's* DNA lives on even in today's RPGs.

It's hard to talk about *Baldur's Gate* without spending a bit of time on its developer, Bioware, so let's do that now. Founded in 1995 in Edmonton, Alberta, deep in the deadly jungles of Canada, Bioware was the baby of medical doctors Ray Muzyka, Greg Zeschuk, and Augustine Yip, along with Zeschuk's cousin Marcel and brothers Trent and Brent Oster. The developer's first game was an action game, *Shattered Steel*, published by Interplay Entertainment to a reasonable degree of success. Many of Bioware's members were big fans of RPGs, however, so they decided they wanted to make one for their next project. They cooked up a demo called *Battleground: Infinity*, which impressed Interplay sufficiently to give them the go-ahead, with one strong suggestion. Interplay had recently picked up the *Dungeons & Dragons* license from SSI, and wanted Bioware to make use of it. It proved to be a match made in heaven. With some tweaks to alter their Infinity Engine's rules to mirror those of the then-current *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Second Edition Revised*, they were ready to get to work on a game that would do the license as proud as possible.



That Infinity Engine would go on to extend the life of the soon-to-be-retired AD&D rules by a few years, supporting noteworthy games like *Icwind Dale* and *Planescape: Torment*, before finally retiring more or less along with Interplay. *Baldur's Gate* itself would see an expansion, a sequel, an expansion to that sequel, and an action-RPG console spin-off series before going off into the night. Planned third installments to both the main series and the spin-off *Dark Alliance* would never see the light of day, and with the rights to various pieces of the series being complicated, to say the least, it was believed the best anyone could hope for was a spiritual successor like *Neverwinter Nights*. Indeed, that may well be the end of *Baldur's Gate's* story, but there's at least hope these days in the form of Beamdog, a company formed by Trent Oster and Cameron Tofer, one of the key members of the original *Baldur's Gate* team.

Initially conceived as, and still generally operating as, a digital distribution platform for various PC games, the company dipped its toe into development with the 2011 port of *MDK2* on the Nintendo Wii. Overhaul Games was formed as a division of the company to work on the HD version of *MDK2*, and after what must have been exhausting legal negotiations, a remake of

Baldur's Gate. Thus far, the fruits of those negotiations include *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*, *Baldur's Gate 2: Enhanced Edition* ([\\$9.99](#)), and the newly released *Icewind Dale: Enhanced Edition*. Trent Oster at one point expressed hopes that Beamdog and Overhaul would one day be able to deliver a *Baldur's Gate 3*. Only time will tell if they'll be able to realize that dream, but while we wait, there's certainly nothing wrong with having some of the best CRPGs of the 90s on our mobile devices. Well, there are a few things wrong, but we'll get to that in a bit.



In the year 2014, Bioware's style of RPG design and storytelling are fairly well-established. So well-established, in fact, that before people were upset with them not adhering to their roots closely enough, the most frequently-heard complaint against them was that they recycled a few too many of the broad strokes from game to game. It's interesting going back to *Baldur's Gate* with future experiences in mind, especially if, like me, you haven't really given the game a playthrough since its initial release. This was an incredibly fresh experience at the time it was released, but you can see all the familiar patterns forming already. You play as a hero with a secret past and a special destiny, who after a brief introduction is forced out of their home, unable to

return for quite some time. You'll meet companions who fit many of the familiar templates that Bioware enjoys trotting out to this day, and have to juggle the disapproval of various group members with differing alignments. There are dialogue trees aplenty, and the combat has that same lack of weight that persists in Bioware games even now. Yet there's an inescapable charm to the whole thing, a pleasant window back to a time when the developer didn't have tens of millions of dollars to roll into a universe and instead had to be very clever about their design to hide just how small-scale the project really was.

The main game is divided into seven chapters, though you're free to wander around quite a bit whenever you like. Certain locations are only open to you after story events have occurred, but exploration nevertheless rewards you with tons of loot and sidequests to pursue. The main story begins with you fleeing your hometown with your adoptive father, for reasons he doesn't explain. It doesn't take long for trouble to come knocking, however, and your father and protector is soon killed trying to defend you. All alone, with no clear idea of why everyone seems to be after you, all you have to go on is your father's suggestion that in case of trouble, you should go on ahead to an inn to meet up with a couple of his old friends. Your childhood friend who was raised alongside you was tailing along and saw the whole thing. If you'll have her, she'll be your first party member. Meanwhile, there's an iron shortage in the world, a seemingly irrelevant bit of world building that twists into your main quest soon enough. *Baldur's Gate* is one of those games where, if you focus, you can travel quickly and smoothly along the central plot until you reach the ending, finishing the game in under 30 hours. That requires ignoring a whole lot of interesting side content, though, and I don't know anyone who has managed to resist that temptation completely.



Contributing to that is the included expansion, *Tales Of The Sword Coast*, which took a rather novel approach at the time it was released. Often described as an add-in rather than an add-on, the expansion doesn't tell a new post-ending story, but rather fattens up the middle of the original game with loads of extra content. There are four extra areas and a couple of pretty interesting quests to pursue along this route, and its structure is such that if you didn't know about the expansion beforehand, you might not even notice that it's not part of the regular game. The additional content almost doubles the length of the game and serves as an impressive expansion in an era that was no stranger to awesome add-ons for PC games. Best of all, it helps flesh out the world even more than the original game already did. Of course, the *Forgotten Realms* world was already quite rich in lore, more so than most *Dungeons & Dragons* settings, but Bioware proved to have a deft hand at creating interesting tales within that framework and translating it skillfully to a video game setting. They've done a lot of great original work lately, but at least in their early days, handing them the keys to a pre-existing universe and letting them do their thing was pretty much a guaranteed success. We don't talk about *Sonic Chronicles* here.

Of course, having lots of content and an interesting world to explore was more normal at that time than you might guess if you weren't in the scene back then. What was so special about *Baldur's Gate*? I think there were two big keys to its success. First of all, it rode the line between complexity and accessibility almost perfectly. There were lots of viable character and party builds to mess around with, and the world had just enough extra stuff to make it feel like it was a living place, not just an amusement park. At the same time, it was a bit more streamlined and, if not strictly linear, at least easier to follow than many other RPGs of its era. It's almost impossible to find yourself in a situation where the path forward isn't made fairly clear. Now, whether that's a plus or minus is down to individual tastes, but it certainly opened the game up for audiences that may have been intimidated by the relative inscrutability of the genre. It's not perfect in that regard, as the AD&D rules it's based on certainly have their layers of obscurity for the average person, but it was miles ahead of most of its peers.



The other thing *Baldur's Gate* did very well is in creating an interesting cast of characters. The first game doesn't quite reach the full potential Bioware would come to be famous for, however. In the original version of the game,

there were none of the romance options that are almost synonymous with the developer's work, though one of the new characters added to the *Enhanced Edition* can be wooed. Even setting that added option aside, the standard interactions with the various oddballs you can meet are still quite memorable. It's hard to juggle what you need in your party in the practical sense with all of the clashing alignments, but it's also kind of fun seeing how they'll react to each other when you stick them together. Plus, there's Minsc, one of the most memorable characters in RPG history, and his moral support/adviser Boo, the miniature giant space hamster. I'm not sure what more you could need. If you do need more than that, I guess there are more than 20 other characters that can join your party, but seriously, Minsc.

This was my first time playing the *Enhanced Edition*. Overhaul has added a few new party members (albeit two of them as IAP), a few new areas, and has carried back many of the additions from *Baldur's Gate 2*, including job classes and subclasses not originally available in the first game. The new characters fit in well enough, with Neera in particular serving a practical purpose as another mage in a game that could use a few more. The new areas are kind of bland, to be honest, with a poor ratio of size to worthwhile treasure and encounters, but it's still nice to have something new to digest, I suppose. There's also a new chunk of content in the form of the Black Pits, which is basically an arena battle mode. It adds a few hours of playtime to the whole affair, but it's curiously not integrated with the main game at all. Too bad. There are also a ton of bug fixes implemented, though as these things go, in squashing bugs, more seem to have come out. I played on iPhone and I had to be constantly wary of accidentally minimizing my sidebars as there's no way to get them back short of reloading your last save. Disappointingly, the movie scenes have been gutted, some of them replaced with some iffy hand-drawn sequences, others just cut altogether.



To be fair to Overhaul, they're clearly juggling a lot of work for the size of their team, and although a lot of time passes between updates, they still seem to be working on the game. That said, critical fixes really should get quicker attention, especially something like the minimized menu issue. Players shouldn't have to wait for the bi-annual content update to get things like that corrected. If I were playing on my computer, I'm not sure if I would go with the *Enhanced Edition* or not, given the regular version is still quite readily available and has a decade and a half of mod support behind it. On mobiles, however, we have little choice but to deal with certain inconveniences for the sake of playing *Baldur's Gate* on the train. The original game's quality still shines through brightly at least, and this version has come a long way since its release, so I'm confident it will one day be the ultimate version that it's striving to be.

Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition is still a really fun game, but I'm not sure how strongly I'd recommend the mobile version. There are so many aspects of the game that aren't well-designed for a mobile experience, in spite of Overhaul's work to try to accommodate that. Bugs are numerous and the developer's updates are infrequent. It's not so bad that you can't enjoy it if

you've got a mind to, but it's certainly not the definitive experience one would hope for. I found myself frustrated almost as often as I was delighted, wrestling with a problematic interface and too many goofy bugs to count as I tried to enjoy my return to Faerun. As a game, it holds up well, but this port isn't a strong one, so I'd only suggest it to those who are forgiving.



That's just my take on it, though. I'd bet that you folks playing on an iPad have a much better time of it. Whichever device you're playing on, I'd love to hear your thoughts. Please leave a comment below or stop by the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums to speak your mind. While you're at it, don't forget to leave a vote for what may well be the last traditional "majority rules" reader's choice. As for me, I'll be back next week with another RPG classic. Have a great weekend of questing, and as always, thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Fetch me the tail of a small rodent!*